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## OPTIMISTIC, DEFENSIVE-PESSIMISTIC, IMPULSIVE AND SELF-HANDICAPPING STRATEGIES IN UNIVERSITY ENVIRONMENTS

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### Abstract

A person-oriented approach was used to investigate what types of achievement strategy people apply in university environments, and how these are associated with their academic achievement, related satisfaction and personal well-being. Two hundred and fifty-four undergraduates filled in first the Cartoon-Attribution-Strategy Test, the Strategy and Attribution Questionnaire, Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale and the revised Beck's Depression Inventory at the beginning of their studies, and one year later an academic satisfaction scale. Two years later, they again filled in the same measures. Their academic achievement was coded yearly from university archives. Four types of achievement strategy were identified: optimistic, defensive-pessimistic, impulsive and self-handicapping. An optimistic strategy was associated with academic satisfaction and well-being, whereas defensive pessimism was related to academic achievement. In turn, a self-handicapping strategy was associated with academic dissatisfaction and low well-being. Academic achievement and satisfaction were also found to predict changes in the use of defensive-pessimistic and self-handicapping strategies. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

### Introduction

There has been increasing interest in the cognitive and behavioural strategies people apply in achievement contexts (e.g. Jones & Berglas, 1978; Norem & Cantor, 1986a, 1986b; Nurmi,

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Onatsu, & Haavisto, 1995). These strategies have been suggested to consist of various psychological processes, such as anticipation of behavioural outcomes, affects, planning of and investing effort in the task at hand, monitoring behaviour, and evaluating goal attainment in terms of causal attributions (Norem, 1989; Nurmi, Salmela-Aro, & Ruotsalainen, 1994). The use of these types of strategy has also been shown to be associated with how successful people are in various achievement or study situations (Jones & Berglas, 1978; Norem & Cantor, 1986a, 1986b; Nurmi et al., 1995a). If people expect to do well, they typically set task-related goals, construct plans for their realization and invest a high level of effort in carrying them out (Norem, 1989; Nurmi, 1993). This enhances the probability of success in the task at hand, and strengthens images of competence in future situations. In turn, it has been suggested that a person who is anxious or anticipates failure often tries to avoid the situation (Peterson & Seligman, 1984), or behaves in a way that will provide an excuse for potential failure (Jones & Berglas, 1978). These types of behaviour typically decrease the likelihood of success in the task at hand, and consequently may lead to low well-being.

Similar types of pattern have also been described in terms of motivational strategies (e.g. Boekaerts, 1996; Pintrich, Marx, & Boyle, 1993). However, the focus then has usually been more directly on goals that students adopt in different learning situations—for example, mastery-orientation vs. performance-orientation (Dweck, 1986; Pintrich & Schrauben, 1992)—and their impact on cognitive engagement. In this framework, the term “cognitive strategy” has been used to refer to the problem-solving or thinking strategies that students use in learning tasks (Boekaerts, 1996; Pintrich et al., 1993). To avoid conceptual confusion, we will use the term “achievement strategy” to refer to the cognitive and behavioural processes by which people aim to achieve their goals, regulate their anxiety, control events and outcomes and maintain their self-esteem in study-related situations (Cantor, 1990; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Several types of achievement strategy have been described earlier. For example, Cantor and her colleagues (Cantor, 1990; Norem & Cantor, 1986a, 1986b) described two types of strategy among young people who were successful in a university environment. An optimistic strategy was characterized by straightforward striving for success based on high outcome expectations and positive past experiences, and on the desire to enhance an already strong image of competence (Cantor, 1990; Norem, 1989). In contrast, it was typical of students using a defensive-pessimistic strategy to have defensively low expectations and to feel very anxious and out of control before performance. However, these negative expectations did not become self-fulfilling prophesies, but rather served as a protective attributional cover and motivator before performance, thus leading to a successful outcome (Cantor, 1990; Norem & Cantor, 1986b).

In turn, other types of strategy have been found to be associated with poor performance and problem behaviour. For example, Berglas and Jones (1978) described a self-handicapping strategy in the context of academic underachievement. Because self-handicappers are concerned about potential failure, they concentrate on task-irrelevant behaviour in order to create an excuse for it, instead of formulating task-related plans. Although this strategy provides them with attributional benefits, it also decreases the likelihood of success. Another prototypical example of a maladaptive behavioural pattern is learned helplessness (Abramson et al., 1978; Seligman, 1975), which can also be conceptualized as a strategy (Cantor,

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